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SUBJECT: THE NUCLEAR BAN AND NEW ZEALAND'S IDENTITY

Classified By: Political-Economic Counselor
Katherine Hadda, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: For reasons of history and politics, New Zealand's anti-nuclear legislation has become a core part of the nation's psyche. The ban arose just as the country was forging its post-colonial identity, and has become as integral to many Kiwis as the Constitution is to us. Although we may never be able to convince New Zealanders to lift the legislation, we can and should continue to address the anti-Americanism that has become linked with the policy. This includes encouraging new areas of bilateral cooperation that will enable Kiwis to see the positive benefits of our relationship. We should also not let the anti-nuclear issue be used as an argument against a closer relationship with the United States. End Summary.

¶2. (C) U.S. officials are often struck by the strong attachment many New Zealanders hold for their country's anti-nuclear legislation. Whenever we try to discuss the issue's relevance to our current operations in the Pacific, or question the logic of the policy in a post-Cold War world, the response of most Kiwis is that we are bullying New Zealand. What we see as a policy discussion appears to these New Zealanders an attack on their core identity. But how could legislation passed just 20 years ago be so intrinsic to a nation's sense of self? There are four main reasons: history, geography, the search for identity, and politics.

A Brief History Lesson: The Search for a Post-Colonial Identity

¶3. (C) During the second world war, the United States protected New Zealand, then a British dominion, from Japanese invasion. By 1947, Britain had given New Zealand's Parliament sole power to make laws for the country. With the creation of the ANZUS defense alliance in 1951, both New Zealand and Australia formally recognized for the first time that their Cold War security depended primarily on the United States, not Great Britain. Although even at that time an anti-nuclear movement had begun here in response to U.S. and others' nuclear testing in the Pacific, New Zealand remained a strong ally of the United States and allowed U.S. naval ship visits, including in later years those that were nuclear armed or powered.

14. (C) Beginning in the late 1960s, many Kiwis became uncomfortable with being U.S. allies. According to NZ Historian Jock Phillips, while Americans took away military/political lessons from the Vietnam War, New Zealand came away with a new sense of national identity. Opposition to the war was couched in nationalistic terms, because like many Commonwealth countries at that time, New Zealanders were carving out a post-colonial role. Because of the Vietnam war and Britain's declining influence here, what arguably should have been a rebellion against the UK was instead directed against the United States.

15. (C) This desire to distance New Zealand from the United States, and a growing hunger for a uniquely Kiwi identity, were the backdrop against which the anti-nuclear movement took center stage during the 1980s. By that time, American testing in the Pacific had all but stopped, but French testing in the region had created something akin to a mass hysteria about all things nuclear in New Zealand. These and other factors, including rising U.S.-Soviet tensions in the early '80s, revived once more the anti-nuclear movement in Australia and New Zealand. The demonstrators who opposed U.S. warship visits to New Zealand at this time actually had the environment on their mind more than the military. National Party Prime Minister Robert Muldoon helped fan the resentment by encouraging American ship visits, so that he could point to the irresponsible nature of the demonstrators and divert attention from the flailing post-oil shock economy. The Labour Government that took power in 1984 and initiated the anti-nuclear policy the following year also introduced radical economic liberalization that induced real hardship for many Kiwis, including core Labour supporters. Prime Minister Lange, too, welcomed the diversion of anti-U.S. and anti-nuclear sentiment from the problems of the day. Because of his own political ideology he also had the secret agenda of wanting to break New Zealand away from ANZUS, but was afraid the average Kiwi voter would not accept this. Adopting the pro-environment, moralistic stance of the anti-nuclear movement gave him perfect cover to force a break in the alliance.

16. (C) Many New Zealanders consider Lange's performance at a 1985 Oxford Union debate to be a defining moment in their modern history. Lange, who argued the position "Nuclear Weapons are Morally Indefensible," for the first time gave New Zealanders a confident and witty Prime Minister lecturing the world on a position unique to their country. Kiwis most applaud Lange's remark that he could smell the uranium on the breath of the opposing young American debater. The line was devoid of substance but to Kiwis that's beside the point: the debate's significance was not intellectual but emotional. New Zealanders were taking a moral stand worthy of the country's Scottish missionary forefathers. Kiwis told themselves they were a force in the world. For many Kiwis, the Chernobyl disaster the following year vindicated the anti-nuclear policy and it became law in 1987.

Where I Stand Depends on Where I Sit...

17. (C) The second factor behind the nuclear ban's continued draw is size and geography. New Zealand is as large as California, but its population is just four million. It's a standing joke among Kiwis that everyone knows everyone else. The country's newspapers resemble those in small town America. Every major car accident is reported. Everyone who has ever passed through New Zealand is a New Zealander. (The press consider recently released Iraq hostage Harmeet Sooden a New Zealander, even though his passport -- and the rest of the world -- identify the Auckland University student as Canadian.)

18. (C) New Zealand's small, geographically isolated population also prides itself on its self-sufficiency and ingenuity. They have an apocryphal ability to fix anything with some number 8 wire, and visitors are often struck by how

much of the country's food is locally produced. Kiwis' no-nonsense pioneer spirit -- possibly aided by indigenous Maori and Pacific island culture -- has also led to an admirable insistence on egalitarianism. But this has the downside of at times encouraging the impractical and discouraging innovation. The Prime Minister flies on commercial or charter flights, even within the country. The media waxes indignant over the parliamentary pension that New Zealand's High Commissioner in London draws on top of his "high" NZD 125,000 (USD 75,000) salary. The country's "tall poppy syndrome" -- an overwhelming desire to cut high fliers down to size -- is legendary.

¶9. (C) As with many small towners, New Zealanders long to be noticed. They often have to clarify for themselves and outsiders how they differ from their larger and more ebullient neighbor Australia (think Canada and the United States). They are also painfully aware that as many as 20 percent of their fellow countrymen (25 percent of those with advanced degrees) have chosen to live abroad, often permanently. There's a nagging insecurity among many Kiwis that their country is inferior. As a result they vigorously point to its uniqueness. Many things, from Busy Bee toys to Holden cars, are classified as "iconic" Kiwiana. The anti-nuclear legislation, seen as both unique and a way to cut the mighty United States down to size, is the most iconic of all. (Many of us suspect that if we were to openly applaud the ban -- or at least say it no longer mattered to U.S. policy -- the legislation would lose some of its appeal.)

¶10. (C) Despite their country's small size, geographic isolation makes New Zealanders feel invulnerable. The military regards itself as an expeditionary force, and the official charged with international policy at the Ministry of Defense almost laughed out loud when Polcouns once suggested New Zealand might one day appreciate the option of U.S. military assistance. The lack of a geographic threat also enables Kiwis to view the world with a sense of detachment and a bit of moral superiority. Many feel their small country's interests are best served by multilateral rather than bilateral arrangements. New Zealand's UN Perm Rep Rosemary Banks has told us that because former PM Frazier helped create the UN, many Kiwis have an unrealistic view of the country's influence in that body. They also have a poor understanding of how much the multilateral system depends on the United States. It fits New Zealanders' sense of moral, multilateral destiny to try to set an example for the rest of the world through the anti-nuclear legislation.

The Continued Search for a Common Identity

¶11. (C) In the twenty years since the anti-nuclear legislation was implemented, New Zealand has become a much more heterogeneous society. In 1975 and again in 1987, the country changed its race-based immigration policies. As of the 2001 census some 30 percent of New Zealanders were Maori, Pacific Islanders, Asian, African, or Middle Eastern. In recent years, Maori have become more vocal about their historic grievances and continued lag in key social indicators such as income and health. The increased ethnic mix and debate over the proper compensation for Maori have raised a lot of questions here about what it means to be a New Zealander.

¶12. (C) Recently, a guide showing EAP A/S Hill around the national museum was asked whether the country sees Maori culture as a common bond. He immediately answered that it was the country's nuclear ban that made it unique. The probable reason for that non sequitor is that in today's New Zealand, people see both Maori culture and the anti-nuclear policy as means of uniting Kiwis and differentiating the country from others. The Labour government in particular has used the search for a uniquely Kiwi identity -- including being Maori, clean, green, and anti-nuclear -- to its advantage. A junior Labour MP tells us Prime Minister Clark

sees this as part of her legacy.

Politics

¶13. (C) Some of the anti-nuclear legislation's creators, including Prime Minister Clark and Defense Minister Goff, are in Government today and remain personally attached to the policy. Their sentimental attachment aside, the ban has also proved useful for them politically. The Labour government continues to cast itself as the guardian of the policy, and the opposition National Party as closet U.S. poodles who would immediately scrap the legislation if elected. There is some evidence that such claims won Labour votes during the last election campaign. But as we have previously reported, National was never likely to be able to overturn the legislation anyway because it is such a lightning rod issue. Further, National is now close to declaring that it supports maintaining the ban. In this way, the Nats hope to eliminate it as a source of strength for Labour.

¶14. (C) The truth is that since 1994 no NZ Government of either party has ever really had to pay a high price for maintaining the anti-nuclear policy, whereas scrapping it would cost a government dearly at the polls. There were no U.S. bases in New Zealand at the time the anti-nuclear legislation was passed, and so unlike Australia no potential economic loss from a military split. Unlike France, which successfully gained the release of the agents behind the "Rainbow Warrior" bombing by threatening economic sanctions, the United States has not been able to change New Zealand policy through bans on high level political and military contacts. In future reporting, we will explore further the impact of these U.S. policies in New Zealand.

Where Do We Go From Here?

¶15. (C) The anti-nuclear legislation is not going anywhere soon, as most New Zealanders have a strong identification with the policy and there is no political leadership calling for a change. New Zealand's future energy shortages may force an eventual rethink on the nuclear ban, but for now most analysts see this as unlikely given the options of solar, wind, and other technologies that are more in keeping with New Zealanders' "clean and green" self image.

¶16. (C) Nor would a decision to explore the use of nuclear energy necessarily mean New Zealand would allow U.S. naval ship visits, even on paper. The ban -- and U.S. reaction to it -- has been used by its masters to become a surrogate for New Zealand nationalism (and, by extension, anti-American sentiment). Even if Kiwi officials were to decide it would be in their interest to change the policy, they'd have a hard time doing so.

¶17. (C) But although the ban is tough to address directly, the underlying anti-Americanism does not have to be. We have found that by shifting the conversation from the ban to New Zealand's overall security interests, we have encouraged New Zealanders to take a broader look at US-New Zealand cooperation in the region and around the globe. Media coverage of New Zealand's participation in the Proliferation Security Initiative has been quite breathless, for example. While previously this was due to misreporting that the U.S. had changed its policy limiting joint exercises, there now seems to be genuine interest in New Zealand's contribution to this US-led multilateral effort. We can and should continue to look for more such ways to encourage our Kiwi counterparts to cooperate with us on issues of bilateral and regional interest. We should also act -- within our broader interests -- to keep the anti-nuclear issue from being used against those of all political stripes who want a closer relationship with the United States.
McCormick